"COFFEE MEGG AND ILK, PLEASE"

By ROBERT C. BENCHLEY

Servile, almost cringing.

GIVE me any topic in current sociology, such as "The Working Classes vs. the Working Classes," or "Various Aspects of the Minimum Wage," and I can talk on it with considerable confidence. I have no hesitation in putting the Workingman, as such, in his place among the hewers of wood and drawers of water—a necessary adjunct to our modern life, if you will, but of little real consequence in the big events of the world.

But when I am confronted, in the flesh, by the "close up" of a workingman with any vestige of authority, however small, I immediately lose my perspective—and also my poise. I become servile, almost cringing. I feel that my modest demands on his time may, unless tactfully presented, be offensive to him and result in something, I haven't been able to analyze just what, perhaps public humiliation.

For instance, whenever I enter an elevator in a public building I am usually repeating to myself the number of the floor at which I wish to alight. The elevator man gives the impression of being a social worker, filling the job just for that day to help out the regular elevator man, and I feel that the least I can do is to show him that I know what's what. So I don't tell him my floor number as soon as I get in. Only elderly ladies do that. I keep whispering it over to myself, thinking to tell it to the world when the proper time comes. But then the big question arises—what is the proper time? If I want to get out at the eighteenth floor, should I tell him at the sixteenth or the seventeenth? I decide on the sixteenth and frame my lips to say "Eighteen out, please." (Just why one should have to add the word "out" to the number of the floor is not clear. When you say "eighteen" the obvious construction of the phrase is that you want to get *out* at the eighteenth floor, not that you want to get *in* there or be let down through the flooring of the car at that point. However, you'll find the most sophisticated elevator riders, namely, messenger boys, always adding the word "out," and it is well to follow what the messenger boys do in such matters if you don't want to go wrong.)

So there I am, mouthing the phrase, "Eighteen out, please," as we shoot past the tenth — eleventh — twelfth — thirteenth floors. Then I begin to get panicky. Supposing that I should forget my lines! Or that I should say them too soon! Or too late! We are now at the fifteenth floor. I clear my throat. Sixteen! Hoarsely I murmur "Eighteen out." But at the same instant a man with a cigar in his mouth bawls "Seventeen out!" and I am not heard. The car stops at seventeen, and I step confidentially up to the elevator man and repeat, with an attempt at nonchalance, "Eighteen out, please." But just as I say the words the door clangs, drowning out my request, and we shoot up again. I make another attempt, but have become inarticulate and succeed only in making a noise like a man strangling. And by this time we are at the twenty-first floor with no relief in sight. Shattered, I retire to the back of the car and ride up to the roof and down again, trying to look as if I worked in the building and had to do it, however boresome it might be. On the return trip I don't care what the elevator man thinks of me, and tell him at every floor that I, personally, am going to get off at the eighteenth, no matter what any one else in the car does. I am dictatorial enough when I am riled. It is only in the opening rounds that I hug the ropes.

My timidity when dealing with minor officials strikes me first in my voice. I have any number of witnesses who will sign statements to the effect that my voice changed about twelve years ago, and that in ordinary conversation my tone, if not especially virile, is at least consistent and even. But when, for instance, I give an order at a soda fountain, if the clerk overawes me at all, my voice breaks into a yodel that makes the phrase "coffee egg and milk" a pretty snatch of song, but practically worthless as an order.

I shall not be waited on until every one else has left the counter and they are putting the nets over the caramels for the night.

(Illustration by Brown Bros.)

If the soda counter is lined with customers and the clerks so busy tearing up checks and dropping them into the toy banks that they seem to resent any call on their drink-mixing abilities, I might just as well save time and go home and shake up an egg and milk for myself, for I shall not be waited on until every one else has left the counter and they are putting the nets over the caramels for the night. I know that. I've gone through it too many times to be deceived.

For there is something about the realization that I must shout out my order ahead of some one else that absolutely inhibits my shouting powers. I will stand against the counter, fingering my ten-cent check and waiting for the clerk to come near enough for me to tell him what I want, while, in the mean time, ten or a dozen people have edged up next to me and given their orders, received their drinks and gone away. Every once in a while I catch a clerk's eye and lean forward murmuring "Coffee"—but that is as far as I get. Some one else has shoved his way in and shouted, "Coca-Cola," and I draw back to get out of the way of the vichy spray. (Incidentally, the men who push their way in and footfault on their orders always ask for "Coca-Cola." Somehow it seems like painting the lily for them to order a nerve tonic.)

I then decide that the thing for me to do is to speak up loud and act brazenly. So I clear my throat, and, placing both hands on the counter, emit what promises to be a perfect bellow: "COFFEE MEGG AND ILK." This makes just about the impression you'd think it would, both on my neighbors and the clerk, especially as it is delivered in a tone which ranges from a rich baritone to a rather rasping tenor. At this I withdraw and go to the other end of the counter, where I can begin life over again with a clean slate.

Here, perhaps, I am suddenly confronted by an impatient clerk who is in a perfect frenzy to grab my check and tear it into bits to drop in his box. "What's yours?" he flings at me. I immediately lose my memory and forget what it was that I wanted. But here is a man who has a lot of people to wait on and who doubtless gets paid according to the volume of business he brings in. I have no right to interfere with his work. There is a big man edging his way beside me who is undoubtedly going to shout "Coca-Cola" in half a second. So I beat him to it and say "Coca-Cola," which is probably the last drink in the store that I want to buy. But it is the only thing that I can remember at the moment, in spite of the fact that I have been thinking all morning how good a coffee egg and milk would taste. I suppose that one of the psychological principles of advertising is to so hammer the name of your product into the mind of the timid buyer that when he is confronted by a brusque demand for an order he can't think of anything else to say, whether he wants it or not.

Harsh, dictatorial, intolerant.

This dread of offending the minor official or appearing to a disadvantage before a clerk extends even to my taking nourishment. I don't think that I have ever yet gone into a restaurant and ordered exactly what I wanted. If only the waiter would give me the card and let me alone for, say, fifteen minutes, as he does when I want to get him to bring me my check, I could work out a meal along the lines of what I like. But when he stands over me, with disgust clearly registered on his face, I order the thing I like least and consider myself lucky to get out of it with a little disgrace.

And yet I have no doubt that if one could see him in his family life the Workingman is just an ordinary person like the rest of us. He is probably not at all as we think of him in our dealings with him—a harsh, dictatorial, intolerant autocrat, but rather a kindly soul who likes nothing better than to sit by the fire with his children and read.

And he would probably be the first person to scoff at the idea that he could frighten me.

AFTER SING SING, THOMPSONVILLE

"I'm Still for Prison Reform, But It Seems to Me Now There Is More Need for Reforming the Thompsonvilles."

(By Courtesy of "The New Republic")

"JAILBIRDS have no cause to kick." That is what the editor of "The Thompsonville Courier" said to me when I offered to let his readers know how a dead Middle Western village seems to a graduate from an up-to-date penitentiary. It may be that you feel the same way as the editor. When I confess to four years behind me "in the service of the state" you'll be justified in inferring that it was for something pretty crooked. I am twenty-three; so you may be sure my lawyer played up my extreme youth to the best of his ability. Also, I got the benefit of the usual sentimentalism about neglected childhood, the force of circumstances and social responsibility. When the judge slapped four years on me I felt I was getting off rather easy. I'd been a bad egg, and for all you know I may still be a bad egg. I never was a liar, though, or a romancer. And so you can take my account of Thompsonville as something just as near the truth as I can make it.

When you first strike Thompsonville, you think it is the sweetest place in the world. It is at the end of a branch line, and there is one accommodation train every day except Sunday. For the rest of the time the old town can sleep, for all anybody cares, in the bend of its little river, with deep pools where you catch the catfish with your hands, when the water is low. The streets are roofed over with the branches of maple and sycamore trees, and the houses, mostly one story, with bay windows and kitchen ells, stand in a green twilight. The sun doesn't get into the town at all except on Main Street, where the farm horses have gnawed the bark off the trees in front of the grocery stores and the blacksmith shop. The elms and sycamores follow the highways out into the country and down the lanes to the farm houses and barns, which they smother with their branches. All the people here, except those who have to work in the fields, look pale and pudgy, like the boys in the penitentiary in the days of the cell system. There's a lot of sickness here, too. A man from a well run penitentiary wouldn't dare to live in one of those dark, musty houses on River Street, or even in one of the older farm houses. Fortunately for me, my friend the philanthropist who planted me here to be redeemed got me a job on a rather new farm near the village, where the shade trees haven't had time to grow very large. The sun gets into my windows in the morning. It might be there all day if the farmer's wife didn't come in as soon as I am out at work and close the blinds and draw the shades. Thompsonville hates the sun.

My employer, Mr. Harding, is one of the best hearted men you ever saw, and I don't believe there is a kinder woman in the world than his wife. They are both about fifty and never had any children. They promised the philanthropist to treat me like a son, and that is exactly how they have treated me. They never refer to my past, and do their best to discourage me from referring to it. They had intended to keep it entirely dark, and were unhappy when they found that I had let it out. They run a mixed farm, and try to raise almost everything—a little corn, a few potatoes, a little garden stuff, some cows, pigs and chickens. It is a fussy, frittering kind of business. On Mr. Harding's farm you get up before the sun and wake up the cows to milk them. Then you go around and wake up the horses and the pigs to feed them. You eat breakfast before you are entirely awake yourself, and then go out into the field and work a little while at one thing and a little while at another. In that way you fill up a very long day, never doing any real work. At the penitentiary they tried to teach us to work hard while we were at it. Our boss made us see that work isn't very tiresome if you make real progress with what you are doing. Mr. Harding has just the opposite view. Whenever he catches me swinging my hoe or axe as if I wanted to get the work done, he gives me a little sermon about haste making waste. I've discovered that he thinks of work as something made chiefly to fill up the time. So we keep going from 5 in the morning until 9 at night, spinning out work we could easily do in eight hours. The other farmers around Thompsonville do just the same thing, and so do the better families down in the village. They think it keeps them out of mischief.

When Mr. Harding and I work side by side, hoeing corn or milking cows, we hardly ever find a word to say. Mr. Harding never heard of sociology and doesn't want to hear of it. He won't talk religion because he thinks everybody has a right to his own religion, and he won't talk politics because he thinks nobody knows anything about it except what the newspapers say, and they are full of lies. He won't even gossip; it's against his principles. Mrs. Harding is the same way, and at meals we never say anything but "Pass the molasses, please," or "How do you like this coffee? It's two cents cheaper." For a man who has been through a modern penitentiary, this is living like the dumb brutes. In the penitentiary we were always talking about something interesting. We had theories about personal responsibility for crime, about the influence of environment, what the state ought to do to keep young fellows out of crime, and what it could do with us after we had served our time. Of course there were some fellows with funny ideas, like Reddy McMahon, who thought the Federal government ought to regulate the locksmith's trade, so there wouldn't be so many easy locks to tempt poor boys, and Shorty Higgs, who argued that they ought to hang a few pickpockets on the main street, as an example to beginners. But there were lots of good ideas floating round the penitentiary. We knew pretty well what they do with our likes in England and Sweden and Siberia, and how the courts manage things in France and Italy, and how the military settle their crooks.

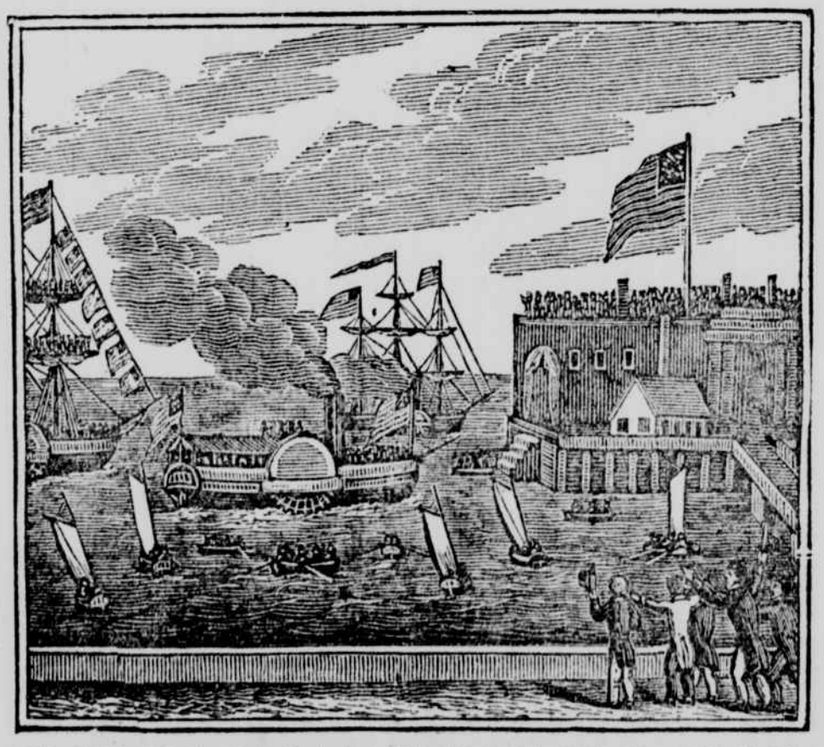
Not that there isn't talking enough going on down in the village. There is all the gossip you care to hear, but it's dreadfully uninteresting if you haven't known the people all their lives. The farmers come in every Saturday and argue by the hour as to which are better, Holstein or Shorthorn cattle, yellow-dent corn or Great Southern White. They never get anywhere with their arguments. Nobody listens to any one but himself. Mr. Harding is just as much set in his ways as any of them. I've sometimes offered suggestions as to how we could improve our farming, but Mr. Harding always freezes me out. It was very different at the penitentiary. There they were ready to listen to suggestions for improving the work. Even if the suggestions weren't practical, they showed that the boys were thinking, progressive.

When my friend the philanthropist told me about the place he had found for me down here in Thompsonville he warned me that things would seem dull and slow, at first. "But you'll find the tone of the place sweet, pure, wholesome." That was the way it looked to me at first, and I was afraid I might corrupt the town, with my penitentiary-made ideas. But now I'm not so sure that the moral tone of the penitentiary wasn't higher, on the whole. We had lived pretty rough lives, but we knew what wrong is, and were taking our punishment for it. We knew when we were shirking and lying, and generally we were ashamed of it. Some of us expected to take up the old life when we got out, but we were ready to accept the consequences. The young fellows I meet here, around town or under the willows by the fishing pools, have a lot of talk that would surprise you. To listen to it, you'd say there isn't anything they wouldn't do if they could get away without penalties. They have the imagination of horrible crooks; all they lack is the nerve. At the penitentiary we made a big difference between the persons who respected and those we didn't. We could tell an honest man as soon as we laid eyes on him, and whether we liked him or not we never had anything to say about him he wouldn't have been willing to hear. And as for women, if any of the fellows dared to say a word against one we respected, like the superintendent's wife, we'd have knocked his head off. These Thompsonville boys don't respect anybody, least of all women. Maybe you think I've got a grudge against these boys because they don't take to me. But they do take to me. Some one of them is always running in to get me to come out to some party or fishing trip. Mr. Harding doesn't like it; he's actually afraid they will corrupt me. He considers them a terribly bad lot. The Thompsonville young men used to be all right, he says, but after the railway came in every boy who was good for anything went down to the city to make his fortune. The boys who have stayed here are just leavings, without brains or ambition, and having nobody better than themselves to associate with they get worse and worse.

There are about twice as many girls as boys in Thompsonville, and they look to me like a different race. They are quiet and sweet and seem rather sad. Mr. Harding says there aren't finer girls anywhere, and I believe him. Of course I don't know them; I feel that they wouldn't want to be acquainted with a man of a record like mine. It might spoil their chances—though God knows what their chances are here. . . . There is one I know pretty well. I deliver vegetables at her house, and I spend a good deal more time talking to her than is necessary. She is very nice to me; she thinks I would never have gone into trouble if I had had a good woman's influence. Maybe so; certainly don't feel very set up over my past life when I'm talking to her. She is a favorite with Mr. and Mrs. Harding. They have hinted that if I marry and settle down here I'd get their farm after they die. When it dawned on me they might be driving at something I got rather scared. Me married and settled down! With my record, I'm not good enough. And besides, after a while I might come to look on Thompsonville as a kind of life-term.

I'm still for prison reform, but it seems to me now that there is more need for reforming the Thompsonvilles. Somebody like Tom Osborne ought to make his home in each of these little old villages, let in the sun and systematize the work, and let loose a few ideas for the young fellows to try their minds on. You can never make very much of a penitentiary. At best, the boys who come out will be rather a bad lot. But a place like Thompsonville, where everybody could have all the food and air and sun he needs, could be made into a kind of little heaven, under its swaying treetops in the bend of the shining river.

ON WEDNESDAY NEW YORK CELEBRATES LAFAYETTE'S BIRTHDAY.



A Wood Cut of Lafayette's Arrival at This City in July of the Year 1824. He Was at That Time Overwhelmed with Popular Applause and Voted the sum of $200,000 and a Township of Land.

FOCH, THE D'ARTAGNAN OF WAR

Continued from Page One.

duty on General Foch's staff. The general glowered at the young officer for a minute and said:

"I have seen you before. On October 13, 1909, you dined at the house of General de la Croix, in Paris. You sat at the far corner of the table between X and Y."

The order of the day in which the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor was conferred on him said:

"He has shown under all circumstances, both in defensive and offensive operations, a strategic ability without parallel. Thanks to his indisputable authority and the adroitness of his counsels, he has contributed in a great part to the co-ordination of the efforts of the Allied armies and thus has rendered most eminent service to the nation."